

Notes on fast in India

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One of the contrasts apparent in Indian culture is the importance given on the one hand to nourishment – and to its dependence on water and on the human effort to obtain both – and on the other hand to its opposite, fasting.

Food is a cultural issue, and food transactions have shaped Indian society. Food's merit was extolled in ancient texts, from Vedic sacrifice onward; even today most ritual offerings consist of food, and by eating *prasāda*, the left-overs of food offered to the deity, devotees and sacrificers believe they come into contact with the divine.¹ In Olivelle's words, 'Food plays a central role in the socio-cultural construction of reality in India. Indian culture has formulated elaborate rules, prohibitions, and classifications in regard to food'.²

Fasting lies at the opposite end of the quest for food, but surprisingly enjoys equal prestige, depending of course on the community envisaged. This paper discusses mainly 'Hindu' communities. In the ascetic experience food is perceived as dangerous,³ because it is seen as conducive to greed,⁴ and Indian ascetics are well known for their long fasts. These traditions of fasting are quite ancient,⁵ and persistent: people in India still fast, for quite different reasons. Interestingly, Indian fasts can be absolute or partial, but the act of voluntary fasting shows the faster in complete control of his body and senses, and the ability to restrain one's instincts was/is much appreciated.⁶ Indeed, when people are constrained to fast by lack of resources, they do not enjoy any prestige.

In the literature there are several terms for fasting, as:

1. See Olivelle 1991, 22.

2. *Ibid.*

3. The Jains speak of 'fear of food', as in Jaini 2000, *passim*.

4. The first mention of this is in the *Agāṅṅāsutta* of the *Dīghanikāya*: greed, by a gradual process, is born of eating (see comments of Warder 1970, 155-64; Olivelle 1991, 29-32) and in turn produces the need for a ruler, to regulate transactions.

5. This practice is already found in the prescriptions for sacrificers and *brahmacārins* of *Atharvaveda* under the generic term *tapas*.

6. Whether real or pretended, as in stories found for instance in *Kathāsaritsāgara*, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* and satire.

anāśa, anāśaka, anāśana: fasting

anāśin: the faster

anāśakāyana: a course of fasting

upavāsatha: attendance, from which Buddhist *uposatha* and Jain *poṣada*

upasaḥ: sitting in attendance

pratiśī: fasting

prāya, prāyopaveśa: fast to death

niyama: restraint; it includes fast, like fasting includes restraint from sex.

In mythological terms,⁷ fasting deals a blow to the *asuras*, and particularly to Vṛtra, because ‘the belly is Vṛtra’, *udaram vai vṛtraḥ* (*Taittirīyasamhitā* [*Taitt.*] II.4.12.6, and similarly *Śatpathabrāhmaṇa* [*Śat.*] I.6.3.17). Lévi⁸ comments:

The notion of fasting thus becomes purified and moralized; at the end of *Śat*, this development is accomplished: ‘in truth, abstention from food is complete asceticism; and this is why one must not eat while fasting’ (*Śat.* IX.5.1.7: *etad vai sarvaṃ tapo yad anāśakas tasmād upavasathe nāśnyāt*).

Lévi further observes that at the time of fasting the nourishment of the sacrificer is milk, and then, significantly, quotes *Śat.* X.6.5.1: ‘hunger is death’, *aśanāyā hi mṛtyuḥ*.

What is fasting supposed to achieve?

In Hinduism fasting was resorted to A) in order to enhance one’s purity, in preparation for special rites, or for life; B) to ask for a boon; C) as a voluntary observance, *vrata*, to acquire religious merit, also on behalf of one’s family; D) as a technique of expiation/reintegration, *prāyaścitta*⁹ – which accompanied by *prāṇāyāma* and Vedic recitation, or recitation of *mantras* and specific holy texts in the case of tantric devotees, would erase the fault of the offender; E) as the ultimate means to obtain redress when all other fail.

Fasting was not a standard medical procedure, except in the case of indigestion from overeating. Āyurvedic texts oppose a complete fast, seen as a health hazard, as their concern is with the well-being of the body: only keeping one’s body in healthy conditions could be conducive to a good spiritual life. A scientific observation of the effects of fasts is already in the *Chandogyaopaniṣat*, with a good understanding of the relationship of food and fast with memory. A Brahmin, before listening to his son’s newly learned Vedic recitation, instructs him to take only water but no food for two weeks. The son obeys, but when he

7. Lévi 2009, 109, n. 31.

8. *Ibid.*

9. An apt definition is in Goodall–Sathyanarayanan 2015, 15: ‘The term *prāyaścitta* covers a number of rites and actions that are held to expiate or repair faults of omission and commission’.

comes back to show the father his learning, he cannot recall anything. His memory returns only after eating solid food.¹⁰ Acknowledgement that certain beings, of different ages, have different food requirements occurs already in the *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* [*Baudh.*]:

Eight mouthfuls are the meal of an ascetic, sixteen that of a hermit in the woods, thirty-two that of a householder, and an unlimited [quantity] that of a student. A sacrificer, a draft ox, and a student, those three can do their work only if they eat; without eating they cannot do it.¹¹

Fasting could be undertaken by men, women, ascetics, supernatural beings – including demons/titans – animals¹² and children.¹³ All the above types of fast include, as part of the general restraint of the faster, abstention from sexual intercourse.¹⁴

A.1 *Fasting to become pure*

A fast for purity was of two types: ritual purity could be temporary, or be the final purity ascetics sought. To the former belong fasts prescribed for the actor and the participants of a rite. People fasted to be pure before a sacrifice, initiation,¹⁵ or a deity's festival. In Vedic sacrifice the actor had to be 'fit to sacrifice, pure', *medhya*. The requirements were fasting and restraint, involving chastity. The initiands, be they Vedic sacrificers or young *brahmacārins*, were believed to become embryos, and embryos are not perceived to eat, but to fast until they are born. *Śat.* III.2.1.16 reads: *garbho vā eṣa yo dīkṣate*, 'he who undergoes the *dīkṣā* is an embryo'. The further conceptual step borders on self-sacrifice, as in *Śat.* III.3.4.21: 'he who undergoes the *dīkṣā* becomes the food offering [to the gods]', *sa havir vā eṣa bhavati yo dīkṣate*. The remarks of Lévi on this¹⁶ are paralleled by those of Heesterman 2007, 265-67, who recalls *Śat.* I.6.3.17, where the victim is regularly equated with the sacrificer, as well as texts¹⁷ stating that in a

10. *Chandogyopaniṣat* VI.8.1-6.

11. *Baudh.* II.7.13.7-8.; also *Āpastambadharmasūtra* II.4.9.13 and *Vāsiṣṭhadharmaśāstra* VI.20-21, and see H. Scharfe 2002, 113-14.

12. The monkey-warrior Aṅgada and his retinue, for ex., fast to death in *Rāmāyaṇa* IV.55.15, Baldissera 2005a, 526-27. In *Skandapurāṇa* LV.1-8 a tiger fasts with Pārvaṭī for a thousand years (Yokochi 2004, 34, 48, 160-63).

13. Prescriptive texts have special provisions for the latter: see *Prāyaścittasamuccaya* XXVI.12.792c-793b on *śisūcandrāyaṇa* fast, which lasts only five days instead of twenty-eight (Goodall-Sathyanarayanan 2015, 331).

14. Āyurveda instead says that a correct sexual activity enhances health.

15. *Tantrāloka* XXII.14b-19 also prescribes a preliminary fast, similar to atonement, for a pupil whose former sectarian signs must be removed.

16. Lévi 2009, 90.

17. *Taitt.* VII.4.9, *Kauṣītaka Brāhmaṇa* XV.I, *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 374.

sattra one's own self is the *dakṣiṇā*.¹⁸ Fasting before a sacrifice is also a matter of etiquette: 'A man should not eat before his human guests have eaten, so how could he eat first, when the gods have not eaten?'.¹⁹

The *Āpastambaśrautasūtra* [ĀpŚS.] reads:

When the consecrated sacrificer (*dīkṣita*) has become thin, he is pure (*medhya*) for the sacrifice. When nothing is left in him, he is pure for the sacrifice. When his skin and bones touch each other, he is pure for the sacrifice. When the black disappears from his eyes, he is pure for the sacrifice. He begins the *dīkṣā* being fat, he sacrifices being thin.²⁰

Lubin recalls a special diet, *vrata*, in *Taitt.* II.8.9, for the *dīkṣā* preceding the Soma sacrifice, different for the different classes: hot milk for a *brāhmaṇa*, barley porridge for a *rājanya*, and a milk and grain mixture for a *vaiśya*.²¹

In Nepal, a self-declared Hindu nation, people fast before all festivals.²² On particular occasions, as at *Dasai/Navadurgā*, they observe complete fasts on *aṣṭamī* or *navamī*.²³

A.2 *The ascetic's fast to achieve a permanent state of purity*

A man entering the ascetic path was dead to the world: as a 'dead' man, for whom the funeral rites had already been celebrated, he did not need any nourishment. The renouncer had no fire, and some did not even carry a begging bowl but ate with their hands or, like animals, ate with their mouths directly from the ground (which can be also a *vrata* and a *prāyaścitta* practice).

Olivelle 1991 focuses on the ascetic traditions, and shows different classifications of ascetic paths,²⁴ with their main division between wandering ascetics, and hermits who abide in one place. The latter differ according to their different ways of procuring food²⁵ and their diet. They avoid certain items, or follow

18. Also Filliozat 1967.

19. *Śat.* II.1.4.1-2.

20. *ĀpŚS.* X.14.9-10 and Bronkhorst 1998, 39.

21. Lubin 2005, 90. The diet is for the *kuṣmāṇḍadīkṣā*, to expiate sexual faults, but it is the same used for the Soma sacrifice.

22. Anderson 1971, Levy 1979, Gutschow-Bāsukala 1987, 135-66.

23. For purāṇic fasts at Navarātrī see Einoo 1999.

24. See Olivelle 1991, 24-27, where he refers to several ancient *Dharmasūtras*, as well as to passages in the *Mahābhārata* (ex. XII.17.10; XII.236.8-12; XIII.129.35-55) and the *Vaikhānasa-dharmasūtra*.

25. They may cook their food or eat it raw, or eat things begged in different ways, or what people may give them without their begging for it (the python *vrata*), or live on a monodiet, or on what is gathered in a forest, or only on water, and finally only on air.

a monodiet, or accept what is given without begging. Some are supposed to subsist on air.

An early description of *tapas* with fasting is in *Śvetāśvataropaniṣat* II.8-13. The effect of *tapas* and yoga has the ascetic reduce his intake of food to such an extent that he has almost no excretions.²⁶

The Jaina ascetics keep the longest fasts, that at the end of their lives can have them starve to death (*sallekhana* or *saṃthara*) in a controlled way. Up to recently, this was regarded with admiration, but a last consulted article shows that this death ritual 'raises constitutional conflict' and that it has actually been forbidden by a High Court judge in Rajasthan on August 10th 2015.²⁷

B. *Fasting for a boon*

In the Epics and the *Purāṇas*, and then in *kathā* and *kāvya*, many beings, as also king and queens, to obtain particular boons undertake voluntary fasts. A few of these are similar to the temporary fast for purity, as purity is required of the 'beggar'. The *kṣatriya* fasted to obtain victory in battle, or children, or special favours, like in the *Sāvitrīyupakhyāna* of *Mahābhārata* III.293-299. Here King Aśvapati observed a partial fast for eighteen years, before obtaining his daughter Sāvitrī. The wise princess chose a husband destined to die one year after his marriage, but then she fasted for three days before the date appointed for his death, III.296.3-17. The heightened state of consciousness born of her physical restraint was such that she won him back from Yama, becoming a paradigm of wifely devotion. Even today on *Jyaiṣṭhapūrṇimā* married women fast to preserve the life of their husbands in the name of Sāvitrī.²⁸

Fasts were also undertaken by demons, who sought special powers, principally that of not being killed. A fit example is that of demon Hiraṇyakaṣipu, whose strict asceticism had obtained from Brahmā the boon of not being killed with a series of different requirements, though he was finally killed by Narasiṃha, who met them all.²⁹ A Kashmirian satire describes the fast-diet used by the *gehagaṇanāpati*, home accountant of the demons, for the sake of depriving the gods of their livelihood:³⁰ 'he went to the bank of the Vaitaraṇī,

26. *Śvetāśvataropaniṣat* II.13, translated in Hume 1921, 398:

Lightness, healthiness, steadiness,
Clearness of countenance and pleasantness of voice,
Sweetness of odour and scanty excretions.

These, they say, are the first stage in the progress of Yoga.

27. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/world/asia/sects-death-ritual-raises-constitutional-conflict-in-india.html>.

28. See Kane 1974, Vol. V, 1, 91.

29. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* VII.3.35-38.

30. Baldissera 2005b, at I.9-10, 15 and 43.

and practised ascetic exercises for a thousand years, for food eating only handfuls of his own urine', *svamūtraculakāhāra*.

C. *Fasting as a voluntary pledge, vrata*

A voluntary fast performed by lay people, without a specific aim, entails a certain kind of prestige, similar to that of Brahmins, monks or ascetics.

Often the *gr̥hapati* fasts on behalf of his entire family, for instance for the Śivarātrī festival. These celebratory fasts usually end with a large feast, *prāraṇā*, in which all members of one's family are invited. An example is also in *Abhi-jñānaśākuntalam* II, prose after v. 16: a messenger comes to summon King Duṣyanta to the family feast that follows a *vrata* performed by the queen mother.

Some fasts in fact are specifically the province of women. Unmarried girls fast for getting a good husband, married women often fast in order to preserve his health. More recently, and notably among the Jains, voluntary fasting became a prerogative of married women, who fast on behalf of their whole family, often in a public display of piety, while male Jains³¹ usually fast only on festive days.

D.1 *Fasting as part of prāyaścitta, practices of reintegration/expiation*

Looking at the early sources of *prāyaścitta* prescriptions Lubin observes: 'Some of the practices that found a place in the *gr̥hya*-codes were first introduced in *Taitt*. For example, the practice of private Veda recitation (*svādhyāya*) as a form of expiation is taught in *Taitt*. II.16-18: Without eating, he should thrice perform *svādhyāya* of the entire Veda'. He then adds: 'In *Kāṭhakagr̥hyasūtra* 8.1-2.a the rules for a *kr̥cchra* (arduous) penance include the avoidance of honey, meat, salt and *śrāddha*-food'.³²

Many of these rules were then exposed methodically in the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* [*Manu*]. Fasting could last from half a day to several consecutive days, a year, or several years. In later texts fasting is accompanied by the recitation of *mantras* of a specific deity: the most usual one for Śaivas, for instance, is the *Aghoramantra*.³³

Rules for fast in *prāyaścitta* apply differently if the fault has been unintentional or intentional, as the former entails a lighter form of reparation. The prescriptions are quite inventive, both in terms of the fault envisaged, of the relative reintegration, and of the length of the fast. Some, like the *prājapātīya*,³⁴

31. They rather give alms or do religious bidding for *pūjā* (see Dundas 1992, 171).

32. Lubin 2005, 89-90.

33. Somaśambhu 1968, Vol. II part III.

34. *Manu* XI.212, Olivelle 2005, 226.

prescribe partial fasts for nine days, and complete fast for the next three days. The *parāka* has a complete fast for twelve days, whereas the *candrāyaṇa* lasts for a whole lunar month: a man ‘should decrease his food by one rice-ball a day during the dark fortnight, and increase it likewise during the bright fortnight’.³⁵ Others are repeated in a prescribed pattern throughout a year or up to several years. A number of *prāyaścittas* have to do with food transgressions, like *Manu* IV.222: ‘If someone eats the food of any of them³⁶ unintentionally, he should fast (*kṣapaṇa*) for three days; if he eats intentionally, as also when he consumes semen, urine, or excrement, he should perform an arduous penance (*kṛcchra*)’.³⁷ Whatever the fault, barring crimes considered unredeemable, the correct performance of *prāyaścitta* reintegrates the person in his social role.

D.2 Partial fasts as *vrata* or *prāyaścitta*

Partial fasts are when people decide, as a *vrata*, or when a *prāyaścitta* prescribes, to fast only in the day, and eat at night, *nākta*, or the opposite, when they eat only in the day, like some types of Buddhist or Jain monks; or when they eat only once a day, *ekabhakta*; or when they avoid certain foods, or eat only some, like when they subsist only on water, or on milk or other substances.

Manu’s chapter XI is devoted to *prāyaścitta*, as are large sections of later tantric³⁸ and agamic manuals like the 11th century *Somaśambhupaddhati*³⁹ or parts of the 12th century Trilocanaśiva’s *Prāyaścittasamuccaya*.⁴⁰ The manuals use the same *prāyaścitta* terminology, but are more detailed.

E. Solemn fast, or ‘fast unto death’, *prāyopaveśa*

In these solemn fasts the fasters, originally ascetics or brahmins, pledged themselves to fast unto death. This fast could be performed with several different aims in mind, usually to try and oblige people in power to redress a wrong done to the faster. In this case, the faster is angry and fasts as his only means to fight injustice,⁴¹ usually against a more powerful opponent. On the other hand, in the case of a pious ascetic, usually a *brāhmaṇa* or a Jaina, it was a way to peacefully end his life in restraint.

35. *Manu* XI.217, Olivelle 2005, 226.

36. *parigrahaduṣṭa*, unfit individuals, or food unfit for other reasons.

37. See *Manu* XI.212, Olivelle 2005, 226. Brackets Baldissera.

38. *Tantrāloka* refers to *prāyaścitta* only in a general manner.

39. Somaśambhu 1968, 224-329.

40. See Goodall–Sathyanarayanan 2015, 329-32, where XXVI.1-14.777a-797b prescribe fasts.

41. See Baldissera 2005a, *passim*.

The oldest reference to a ‘protest fast’ seems to be an example given in an early *Upaniṣat*.⁴² An ascetic performs it in anger, envisaging redress against the inhabitants of a village who did not feed him. This type of fast was used to plead with the ruler for economic redress against an opponent stronger than the claimant. Warriors, and women, used it to protect their honour. It entailed a preliminary *saṃkalpa*, a public, formal declaration of intents, then silence, and sitting in restraint on *darbha* grass after touching water. It had been employed by as diverse claimants as religious people, including an incarnation of the Buddha as a *mātaṅga*,⁴³ and even soldiers, as a powerful political means of blackmailing the government. It was a serious threat to royal authority.⁴⁴ Sometimes it was performed on false assumptions, or to force an issue, like when an old Brahmin suitor fasted in the house of a beautiful young girl he wished to marry.⁴⁵ As many instances of these false claims were clogging the government bureaucracy of Kashmir, a king instated the office of the *prāyopaveśādhikṛtas*, special investigators for *prāyopaveśa* cases. In *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* VI.14 these officers were already in place at the time of king Yaśaskara (939-948 CE). As a practice, *prāya* was officially abolished in 1870.⁴⁶ In times much nearer to ours Gandhi, as a freedom fighter against the British Empire, often exploited its political potential and the moral prestige it afforded. Even then this type of fast, prolonged up to the death if the faster did not obtain justice, was still interpreted as an ascetic stance.

From a pious act believed to bring the practitioner closer to the deity through altered states of mind, or to expiate some faults, Indian fasting later moved into the political arena. It was however not prescribed in Buddhism,⁴⁷ nor in Sikhism. As fasts take place in the religious practice of several foreign communities that took residence in India, such as those of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (though not in Zoroastrianism), it would be interesting, but exceeding the scope of this paper, to draw a comparison with these, especially when their aims are similar.

In contemporary western experience, however, voluntary fasting would probably be seen as an eating disorder.⁴⁸

42. *Kauṣītakyopaniṣat*, 2.1, and see Baldissera 2005a, 515, 532-33.

43. *Papaicasūdanī*, commentary of the *Upālisuttam* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, and see Baldissera 2005a, 533-35.

44. This type of fast then became a politico-economical instrument of blackmail, as is quite obvious in many episodes recounted in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* see Baldissera 2005a, 549-57.

45. *Kathāsaritsāgara* IX.2.30-91, and see Baldissera–Mazzarino–Vivanti 1993, 604-6, and Baldissera 2005a, 535. Fear of *brahmahatya* made the father give him the girl in marriage.

46. Renou 1943–1945, 117, n. 1.

47. Aśoka mentions fasting as a pious act in one edict, but edicts addressed all communities.

48. See for instance Desai 1999.

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